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ABSTRACT

The sociological characteristics of the ethnic and racial groups comprising the New Orleans, Louisiana, population are described in this paper. The immigration and settlement patterns of whites, blacks, Latin Americans, and Vietnamese are reviewed. The present needs of these groups are discussed and, finally, a chart delineating and comparing cultural characteristics of the four groups is presented. (MK)

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NEW ORLEANS: MELTING POT OF THE SOUTH?*

by

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NEW ORLEANS: MELTING POT
OF THE SOUTH?

Part I: History

Creole Versus Anglo-Saxon

New Orleans is one of the few places in the United States where there has been such an intermingling of peoples of many cultures that the cultures themselves have merged and formed an entirely new one. Moreover, this is not a process that took place once, but one that continues as new immigrants come in and older groups become more assimilated into the mainstream culture.

The French were the first to come, of course. In 1718, Jean Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville marked the spot where the capital of the Louisiana territory was to be built. The early days were days of struggle against the elements and against the nature of the land itself. Bitter in-fighting and divisive intrigue were the order of the day. There was a short period of peace and growth (1743-1753) under the Marquis de Vaudreuil-Cavagnial, but the corrupt activities resumed upon his promotion out of the territory. Finally, Louis XV ceded the territory which had been nothing but a burden to the French crown to his Spanish cousin, Charles III, by a secret treaty in 1762.

The Spanish held Louisiana for thirty-four years, and their rule was quite satisfactory to the natives of New Orleans. It was a time of population growth and economic expansion. However, the Louisianians resisted all efforts to change their culture into a Spanish one. They remained French to the end of the regime.

No sooner was Louisiana retroceded to France in 1803 than it was bought by the United States Government. The early Anglo-Saxons in the territory (before 1803) were rough adventurers. Those who came into the city after 1803 were a different breed. They had ability and ambition and were better educated than the natives (Creoles). Therefore, they were more sophisticated politically, economically, even culturally. No wonder that by the 1820's they, with the foreign French, were beginning to dominate the affairs of New Orleans.

To the purist, the term "Creole" applies only to the native white Louisianian of Latin colonial stock, the descendants of the original Spanish and French. Even the Cajuns are excluded. However,

the term "Creole Negro" was accepted in reference to the native-born black. The truth is that there is historical evidence in the 1820's and 1830's that the term designated any person native to the State. The original Creole was called "ancien population."

The romantic view of the original Creoles was that they were handsome, well-educated, conscious of family honor, and disdained the lust for money. Together with their graceful and beautiful women they created the social and artistic atmosphere of New Orleans. The Anglo-Saxons, on the other hand, were seen as money-hungry, semi-literates who prospered economically.

A closer look at the evidence shows that the romantic view is untrue. Since the Creoles neglected their education, their outlook, style and taste were provinvial. The women tended to be plump, too ornate and shallow. The theatre did not interest them and like the Yankee they were drawn by the lure of the dollar. Anyway, by 1850 there was enough intermarriage that the differences between Creole and the American had disappeared.

What remains of the specific Creole influence today? The history, the names, the foods, the buildings, the Vieux Carré are with us. There is a charm that is absent from most southern cities and a certain Latin air that manifests itself from time to time as at Mardi Gras.

OTHER WHITE GROUPS

The Cajuns (a corruption of the word "Acadian") were the first non-Creole white group to immigrate to Louisiana. At the beginning of the French and Indian War (1754), all the French living in Nova Scotia (formerly the French colony, Acadia) who refused to swear allegiance to the British Crown were deported. Those who went to other British colonies felt lost, while those who returned to France were neglected by the government there. Gradually, in the 1760's they began drifting to Louisiana. The Acadian immigrants were not warmly welcomed by the citizens of New Orleans and most of them continued to drift deeper into the State. Some settled along the bayous of southern Louisiana, while others went upriver.

In their new homes, these resourceful people built a prosperous and colorful culture that has room today for the ignorant fisherman and the nouveau riche oilman. During the Depression and

World War II, many Cajuns moved to New Orleans to find work. They settled in outlying areas, such as Kenner and Westwego. They brought and lost their culture with them. Thanks to their own search for their "roots" as well as better communication in general, the city of New Orleans has been enriched by the Cajun culture of southern Louisiana. This includes a whole range of foods, festivals, a sense of loyalty to one's family, region, and church, and a revitalization of the French language. Their economic success in sugar cane, rice, cotton, and oil is not without impact on the financial growth of the port of New Orleans.

The Germans came to New Orleans to escape the famine and political, social and religious confusion of the mother country. It seems that Germans with money or zeal did not remain in the city because of the recurring epidemics and the institution of slavery, but moved on to Texas or up the Mississippi River to the northwestern states. Those who did remain came in three waves. In 1820-1850 they came mostly as indentured servants. The professionals and other well-educated refugees came from 1850 to the Civil War. The greatest migration of Germans came after the Civil War to the end of the century. By this time, there was a group, the German Society of New Orleans, to help the new immigrants. The Germans became Americanized by 1900 and disappeared as a distinct group. Today only the names remain.

The largest immigrant group in the crescent city was the Irish who came to escape the potato famine of the 1840's. Coming without a cent and filling the demand for unskilled labor in the growing city, they crowded into the Irish Channel. Those who survived the recurring epidemics of yellow-fever became small businessmen or entered politics.

The last wave of the 19th century immigrants were the Italians coming from impoverished Sicily during the last decade of the century. They settled into the decaying Vieux Carré which by 1900 was a slum. They were unskilled laborers, peddlers and market people who turned the French Market into an Italian Market. Like all immigrants, they have improved their lot by hard work, thrift, and opportunity. The Italians, like the Germans, have become Americanized. Unlike the Germans, they still retain some of their customs and mores, such as the St. Joseph Day Celebration, including the St. Joseph Altar

which is peculiar to New Orleans.

THE BLACKS

Although the Blacks were the second group of people to come to New Orleans, they are treated separately in this presentation. First of all, they were not immigrants looking for a better life, but slaves forced to lead a worse existence. Moreover, they were set up apart as a separate caste. Not only were they excluded from marriage outside their group, their whole life pattern was narrowly restricted.

Within the black caste system there was further division: slaves and free men/women. Although there was little social distinction between the two groups in the eyes of the whites, there actually were important differences especially from a legal point of view. Only the free black was able to develop a class system somewhat like that of the dominant white class.

The first slaves, about 147 of them, arrived in New Orleans on July 7, 1720. The life that the city slaves led was much different from that of their plantation counterparts. Most were part of small holdings and worked either as domestic servants or at trades that demanded a certain amount of skill. The anonymity available in a large seaport and the presence of a sizeable number of free blacks made it harder for their owners to maintain a rigid control over them. The city slaves were better housed, fed and clothed. They had better medical attention and a richer social life.

Their life was not without severe problems. Indiscriminate selling of family members made it very hard for slaves to build a stable family. Moreover, masters were not only indifferent to promoting sexual morality among their slaves, they themselves sabotaged it. As the tensions that led to the Civil War built up, it became more difficult for slaves to be emancipated. Nevertheless, the general tolerant atmosphere in New Orleans whetted the appetite of the slaves for freedom and made them more able to adjust to freedom than the plantation slave.

It is not known when the first free man of color appeared in New Orleans, or where he was from. The first mention of one was September 13, 1722 in reference to his conviction and imprisonment.

The economic position of the free man/woman of color was often quite favorable. While there were a few wealthy blacks among them, most engaged in crafts or small businesses. The only professions open to them were teaching and medicine. During the 1850's, unskilled Negroes had to compete with cheaper Irish and German immigrant labor.

The legal position of free blacks was unenviable. Once the United States purchased Louisiana, they lost most privileges they had had during the Spanish regime. They became neither bound nor free. Whites feared and watched them closely lest they instigate the revolt of the entire slave population. As the Civil War drew nearer, free blacks faced ever-tightening bonds of legal restrictions and growing hostility from the press. The arrival of Union troops into New Orleans in 1862 was probably welcomed as much by them as by the slaves.

Living in the black community was even more complex during the Reconstruction period (1865-1877). The population was composed of a large number of antebellum free blacks, urbanized freedmen, and the former slaves from the plantations. Included in this mélange were the educated and the ignorant, the highly skilled and the unskilled, the religious and the superstitious, the mulattoes and the blacks, and a larger proportion of females than males, all trying to survive in a society that was basically inimical to them. For the freedman from the plantation, there was the added disadvantage left by one hundred years of slavery: sexual immorality, broken families, fear, ignorance, and poverty. If it had not been for the pattern of life shown by the freed slaves and free blacks in New Orleans, they would have never survived free urban life.

In the political arena, blacks gained relatively few lasting benefits during the Reconstruction period. They played only bit parts in Louisiana politics. They were hampered not only by their lack of experience, but also by their white friends' lack of commitment, the abundance of corruption and the fact that illiterate blacks were subject to manipulation. Even the right to vote gained in 1867 was lost thirty-one years later in the "grandfather clause" which required certain educational and property qualifications of all

voters except those whose fathers or granfathers had voted in 1865.

Blacks were more successful in the economic area. They used the skills they had developed before the Civil War to compete successfully against whites. In fact they had a near-monopoly of certain occupations until frozen out by white unions in the twentieth century. Most of their failures were triggered by forces outside the black community, such as racial discrimination, local depressions and especially by the failure of one bank in which thousands of blacks had deposited their savings.

Slavery left a heavy burden of ignorance among blacks. Most saw education as the important impetus to equality. But in spite of their resolution and sacrifices, educational gains were limited. Corruption in government, lack of adequate funds and short-lived integration in the schools--all conspired against them. Fortunately for the sake of future leaders the record of black higher education was better.

Probably less than twenty percent of slave families were together at emancipation. Consequently, the norm in the black community in 1865 was serial monogamy: a man would live with one woman at a time, but he might live with several in his lifetime. However, through the persistence of such persons, as ministers and preachers as well as the example of the free man/woman, the black family, as long as it was able to escape from the socially disorganized inner city, became a relatively stable patriarchal institution.

The end of Reconstruction left New Orleans with a complex pattern of race relations. Segregation was the order of the day. Yet the presence of a large Catholic population of Latin ancestry and a community of blacks with political powere made for a different sort of segregation. For example, there was widespread miscegenation and an integrated housing pattern, as well as some integration in public accomodations, transportation, social relations, and schools.

This pattern remained until the 1940's when the system of race relations began to experience rapid and decisive change. With the 60's came the Civil Rights Act and long-term gains for blacks--politically, economically and to some extent, educationally. The most concrete example of these gains was the inauguration of Ernest Morial in May of 1978 as the first black mayor of New Orleans.

NEWEST IMMIGRANTS

The last two groups of immigrants have yet to make a lasting impact on New Orleans or to be absorbed by the dominant culture. In 1957, the "new" Spanish began coming in great numbers from Central America primarily, and some from South America. For the most part young, they have come for adventure and for the purpose of improving their lives. The Hondurans have the most representatives (40,000), followed by the Nicaragruans (10,000) and the Guatemalans (9,000). The Cubans came in 1961 (12,000) to escape the Communist regime of Fidel Castro. Unlike the other Latin immigrants, most of them belonged to the middle and upper classes. They worked at menial jobs first, but gradually improved their position until their lifestyle has become quite comfortable. Today their children have become Americanized.

The second group to flee Communist rule and settle in large numbers in New Orleans are the Vietnamese. Having fled Vietnam after the fall of Saigon in 1975, they were drawn by the Catholic and French heritage and weather of southern Louisiana, as well as the ecology of its bayous and waterways and its employment opportunities for those willing to work. There are now 8,000 of them in the metropolitan area with more projected to come. Most know that the bridges are burned behind them and are working hard to become good Americans and New Orleans' newest citizens.

PART II: COMPARISON OF CULTURES

Following is a chart delineating the sociological characteristics of the dominant culture in New Orleans, and three groups that differ. The first group designated "Creole-Wasp" also includes the descendants of European immigrants now absorbed into the mainstream culture, as well as middle- and upper-income blacks. In fact the latter are probably more conservative than the white members of the group. The other three groups are: the lower income Blacks, the Latin Americans, and the Vietnamese.

PART III: THE NEEDS

Members of the Black (lower income group), Latin and Vietnamese communities do not see conforming to the dominant culture as a necessary good. However, some of them have suggested goals for

their communities that include attainment of some of the values, qualities, and material goods that the dominant culture already has. They are outlined below.

The primary need of the black community is some unfinished business leftover from the days of slavery. This is the "need" to name themselves, that is, to be able to determine those things which would improve their quality of life. Some of these would be to be able to choose: the type of job, the level of salary, the kind of education, the location of housing--all those things that middle-class whites take for granted. One way to achieve this is through political power which leads to the next two needs: the need for unity to build self-confidence and cooperation for the purpose of attaining set goals. To set goals is the fourth need for blacks. As one black priest said, when poor Latin immigrants come they know exactly what they want out of their new life. Everything they do, even menial jobs, pushes them to that goal. Lower income blacks tend to act "on the spur of the moment" which often dissipates their earnings and energies.

The fifth need (the first according to the above-mentioned priest) is whatever it takes to raise their standard of living: jobs, higher paying jobs, education. As long as many blacks are poor, the other qualities will be hard to come by. The willingness to exhibit and channel the creativity already found in the black community is the sixth need. Faith is the last mentioned need--not an escapist attitude, but an adherence to the message of Jesus, a message of freedom.

Since the Latins, even those from the lower socio-economic group, come from a different background from blacks, their needs are different. For the poorer Latins, there is sometimes a need for material assistance but not as an ongoing thing. Rather it is a question of a stove here, money for clothes there. However, the greater economic need is in terms of knowledge, a consumer education. In order to alleviate their being taken advantage of by opportunists or their feeling of being cheated when no fraud exists, it is necessary that they come to understand the American economic system. The Latins' ideals for their children tend to be materialistic. High school, yes, but then get out into the world and make money. That is how you will get ahead. Higher education is a rarity among Latins. Therefore, their third need is in terms of higher standard of educa-

tion. Finally, they do need spiritual assistance. The majority of them are Roman Catholics coming from countries with priest shortages. Their religious observance tends to be a private matter. When they seek to become more involved in an American fashion, they are turned off by priests who do not speak Spanish and/or who do not understand their religious needs.

The needs of the Vietnamese are more cultural than economic. Basic to all other needs is the knowledge of English. Since they have been thrown into the dog-eat-dog society of the United States, their survival may depend on their also getting assertiveness training. It would be easier to obtain this through formal education rather than through sad experience. While all immigrants need to understand the American way of life, this is a greater necessity for these Asians coming as they do from a radically different culture. This can be obtained by classes and field trips regarding American history, government, basic law, and the economic system. Finally, the Vietnamese need to do what every newcomer to the United States must do to avoid cultural schizophrenia: combine the old traditions with the American way of life.

CATEGORY	CREOLE-WASP	BLACK	LATIN AMERICAN	VIETNAMESE
1. Values	to get ahead: power, prestige, money	self-determination: political power, survival (few long-term values outside of education)	want kids to be educated (training in values done at home), but not necessarily schooled; want them to have a good paying job	social harmony
2. Religion	Creole, Irish, Italian-Roman Catholic; WASP; German-Protestant	very important since slave days--to be R. Catholic status symbol; upper class most likely to belong to ritual and more conservative Protestant; lower class more emotional cults, Pentecostal, spiritualist store front; vodoo still there	R. Catholic - distinct kind; not Church going because of priest shortage at home, esp. men; devotions & holy objects at home; many men anti-clerical, turned off by Anglo priests; drove some to Protestant religions where ministers speak Spanish	animists, Buddhists, Catholics (many fled North to South Vietnam for religious reasons)
3. Politics	democratic ideals; conservative Democrats moving to Republican Party; power base in New Orleans for a long time	participation growing in all areas of government black vote	most do not become citizens; apolitical; suffrage no practical value	new immigrants--very concerned about change of status; women not involved
4. Language	nothing special	distinct dialect & word usage held over since slavery days; not much difference between New Orleans blacks & whites	general gap - older people speak Spanish; young mix 2 languages (Spaglish); different countries have own idiomatic expressions	highly influenced by Chinese monosyllabic ctructure, tonal, etc.; gradually learning English
5. Ethnic Background	Old French, Old Spanish, intermarried sometimes with Anglo Saxons, Cajuns, Irish, Germans and Italians	African cultures fused with many other ethnic groups, esp. white	1957 began to come in great numbers: Cubans, Hondurans, Nicaraguans, Guatemalans, Costa Ricans, Chileans, etc.	Vietnamese, Montagnards, Khmers

CATEGORY	CREOLE-Wasp	BLACK	LATIN AMERICAN	VIETNAMESE
6. Children out of wedlock	high abortion rate	abortion rate low (counselled by clinics and various groups responsible for this); high number of unwed mothers; children welcome	accepted as part of family	totally unacceptable; living together not acceptable
7. Birth rate	1.8% nationally	high 5-12	2-4 children	3-9 children
8. Women in work force	many out of economic necessity; some for higher standard of living, a few to pursue careers	80% economic necessity	husbands do not want wives to work, but many do so to save for big items; child left in day care center	many women working to save money; children taken care of by relatives & friends
9. Employment	the more the education the stabler the job	many unemployed - feel caught	always able to find work; distaste for welfare; will work at anything	underemployed; prefer work to non-work
10. Economics	materialistic; professionals	blue collar	came to U.S. to improve life; financial betterment goal	gradually moving up; professionals in menial jobs; whole family works
11. Education	value degrees - not necessarily education (for greater financial gain); moving into private schools	vocational; seen as important for advancement & occupation; less education than whites; not enough readiness experience in preschool years	high school important, after that, not valued though some go to college and obtain graduate degrees	highly esteemed; non-interference & involvement in school affairs; teachers highly respected
12. Family	nuclear; patriarchal; natives - close (Cajuns, old French, Spanish); WASP - loosely bound	extended; matriarchal (35%); large in terms of psychological growth (i.e. granfathers, uncles, etc.)	patriarchal (macho); somewhat extended, tightly structured, middle/low income - blue collar; Cubans - middle/upper class	usually extended (3 generations); patriarchal; close & large; closely knit; strong family tradition

CATEGORY	CREOLE-WASP	BLACK	LATIN AMERICAN	VIETNAMESE
13. Respect for Elders	little respect - tendency toward youth culture; family counsel negligible	women respected; men reduced to dependency	yes; family counsel	highly respected
14. Marriage	Creole - marry within group as do many Italians & Irish; WASP - less so; fidelity in marriage expected but not always practiced; religious or civil ceremony; weds within class usually	common law - lack of job opportunity of male; among poorer classes - 60% to 70% not seen as value; socialization life style; religious or civil ceremony	marry within group; double standard of fidelity in marriage accepted; virginity a must in potential wife; religious ceremony a must	in the past arranged by parents; gradually changing
15. Stability	divorce becoming more socially acceptable	the lower the class the higher the divorce rate	as they become more assimilated into the mainstream American culture, they become less stable	strong family loyalties; practically no divorce
16. Head of household	male, but gradually changing, esp. in the more educated; within family, men & women share decisions	women-backbone of family (85%); percentage is increasing	woman subservient to man; supposedly to be protected by man	woman subservient but held in respect by children; retains maiden name; preference for boys
17. Age at marriage	becoming older as more are pursuing careers	marry later legally	young	young
18. Housing	most own homes - multiple bedrooms	most rent or in govt. housing; many in projects; pockets of upper class: Pontchairtrain Park, New Orleans East, Academy Park scattered	Terrytown - Cubans; University City-Holly Heights, FHA; pockets in Uptown; goal - to get single family dwelling	4 main conclaves: Woodland, Marrero, Bridge City, East New Orleans; large families in small apartments; buying own homes gradually
19. Diet	great amounts of beef, fish, poultry, little pork, vegetables, fruits, sweets, fast foods	pork, red beans, rice, starches	rice, black or navy beans	chicken, fish, vegetables, rice, noodles, egg roll, etc.

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